Guinness and Sim: two overlooked files

LAUGHTER IN PARADISE (Associated British Picture Corp., 1951) Produced and Directed by Marie Zampi; Original story and screenplay by Michael Pertwee and Jack Davies; Music by Stanley Black; Camera, William McLeod; 93 mins.

"Laughter in Paradise" was made right after Sim had done "The Happiest Days of your Life" and "Stage Fright", and had thus ups his already considerable reputation as a comic eccentric and character comedian. In a very loose sense, it is a British equivalent of the 1932 American film "If I Had a Million". Its relative sparse exhibition is due to the fact that it was made neither by the Rank nor the Korda interests, but by the rather old-fashioned Associated British company. It was originally released here through a subsidiary of Menagram, and later got involved in "packages" of film which were not terribly commercial. The problem with Associated British was that, with very rare exceptions like "The Quiller Memorandum", they played it safe, catering to trends which, if current, were sufficiently well-established that they would vanish fairly quickly. Even "Laughter in Paradise" is a rather typical example of their product, amiable, entertaining, owing a tremendous debt to its strong cast of character comedians and players, but somehow lacking in wit and originality. Even second-string Sim however, is not to be sneezed at, and there's nothing second-string about his performance or his pantomime - especially in a delightful sequence in Swan and Edgar's, a Picadilly Circus store, where he tries vainly to get arrested for shoplifting. As long as one isn't expecting another "Folly to be Wise", it's a very enjoyable trifle, full of friendly and familiar faces, and an exceptionally good print to boot. Marie Zampi, who directed, was somehow a film-maker who seemed to typify the product which Associated British always had - although always a little behind the times, well-meaning and well-intentioned if never very inspired. Most of his films were light comedies, sometimes with a romantic bent than this one; curiously enough, his best film (made for Columbia) was a genuinely chilling little horror film called "The Fatal Night"; a very stylish film that was too short (50 minutes) and too lacking in physical action or gore to get an American release.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

THE CARD (THE PROMOTER) (J.Arthur Rank, 1952; US release by Universal) Produced and Directed by Ronald Neame; Screenplay by Eric Ambler from Arnold Bennett's novel "The Card"; Camera, Gerald Morris; Music, William Alwyn; Editor, Clive Denner; 88 mins.

Coincidentally, Guinness was in much the same position as Alastair Sim with "Laughter in Paradise" on this film. He'd just made two hugely successful filmed comedies, "The Lavender Hill Mob" and "The Man in the White Suit", his name was big boxoffice both in England and the U.S., and inevitably connected with Guinness however was not anxious to be typecast, and wanted a change. "The Card" though in many ways one of his best films, disappointed at the boxoffice both in England and in the U.S. (where, incidentally, "Laughter in Paradise", despite its rather mechanical qualities, was one of the biggest hits of the year) and in this country, initial reactions are sometimes hard to shake off, and "The Card" has never really caught on here, even in retrospectives. A recent statistical survey showed that it received about one booking to every ten that the mere familiar, and traditional, Guinness vehicles received up, and it is now hardly shown at all. For one thing of course, while light-hearted in tone, it's not solely a comedy, its plot containing elements shared by such diverse British films as "Kind Hearts and Coronets", "Room at the Top", and "Hobson's Choice". Moreover, Ronald Neame, formerly a cameraman (and a superb one) was not specifically a comedy director, and seemed much more concerned (probably correctly) with the pictorial look of the film and with capturing a period flavor, rather than exploiting the comic elements and building them into highlights. Too, the basic story-line might be a little difficult for Americans to get really excited over. In Britain (as much now as in the period setting of the story) individual enterprise has always been somewhat frowned on, and endless restrictions and regulations make life extremely difficult for those that choose to follow that path. Thus, while the Guinness enterprises herein depicted represent real go-getting by British standards, they must inevitably seem tame and slow compared with the superior American films. Even the title was a problem. In Britain the phrase "a card" was already somewhat anachronistic in the 50's, and had changed in meaning to indicate someone who was funny and the life of the party; the American term "promoter" was actually closer to the original meaning of the phrase, but also, to a 50's audience, suggested a modern, high-powered comedy - which the film certainly isn't. The problems clearly are those of expecting the wrong kind of film. "The Card" has charm, humor, a fine sense of period and some lovely performances (especially from Verina Cartwright) and is certainly one of the best of several movie adaptations of Arnold Bennett's turn-of-the-century comedies of manners.

Program ends 10.50.

There will be no time for a post-screening discussion tonight, but next week's program (THE GREAT IMPERSONATION...BACKGROUND TO DANGER) will be shorter so we can have a question and discussion session then.

-- William K. Everson --